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J. G. Bishop

# MODERN SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICISM,

AS EXHIBITED IN

# A LETTER,

WHICH WAS PUBLISHED IN

*The Stratford-on-Avon Herald,*

OF

FRIDAY, THE 9TH NOVEMBER, 1888,

*And which is here separately reprinted for the consideration of those who may be interested in the character of Shakespearean controversy.*

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# SHAKSPERE'S BIRTHPLACE.

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*To the Editor of the Stratford-on-Avon Herald.*

SIR,—Mr. J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps (a name which I contract into Johp) does not treat the Birthplace question fairly, I think. His aim is to support the tradition that the supposed Birthplace was the real one, and it is, therefore, necessary for him to belittle the probability, nay, the fair inference from the facts that Shakspere's father did'nt buy the Birthplace till his poet-boy was between eleven and twelve. Accordingly, John Shakspere's purchase of two houses in Stratford in 1575 is left out of Johp's text of the Life (ed. 7)

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altogether, while in the "Notes on the Birthplace," 1, 383 we find—

> John Shakespeare bought two houses at Stratford in this year, but it is not known in what part of the town they were situated, nor whether they were or were not contiguous to each other. They may even have been located in different streets. All that is certain in the matter is that neither could have been the wool shop (the present Museum), bought by John Shakespeare in 1556 (and dubbed by Johp the Wool Shop †) but it is possible that one of them was

† It may fairly be assumed (says Johp) that in the latter [the Museum, bought in 1555] the then "considerable dealer in wool" (as Johp terms Jno. Shakspere) deposited no trifling portion of his stock," i, 377. The only fact we know is that John Shakspere once sold some wool, as

every farmer did then, and does now once a year.

> the Birthplace, and that the other was a tenement which then existed between that domicile and Badger's estate on the west. The strip of ground which belonged to the poet's father in 1597 (when he sold it to Badger), and adjoined the latter, was then described as a toft, and when its extremely narrow width (1½ft. by 84ft. long) is considered, that term could only have been applied to a fragment of land on which the western end of some building had previously stood.

We have, then, the facts that in 1552 John Shakspere had a house in Henley-street, before which he had a dung-heap; that in 1556 he bought the present Museum; that in 1564 his boy Will was born; that in 1575 he bought two houses and gardens in Stratford; that in 1590 he owned the supposed Birthplace, and that

in 1597 he sold to his western neighbour a slip of land on the west of the Birthplace, on which it is almost certain that a house once stood.

Surely, to use Johp's words, "it may fairly be assumed" that the two houses bought in 1575 were the supposed Birthplace and the house beyond it. And, if so, it may also "fairly be assumed" that, as John Shakspere owned the Museum in 1556, and didn't own the supposed Birthplace till 1575, his boy, Will, born in 1564, was more probably born in the Museum than in the so-called Birthplace, of which there is no evidence that John Shakspere was ever lessee or tenant before 1575. The tradition to the contrary is recorded for the first time, 143 years after the poet's death, and 195 years after his birth; and one knows how little trust can be put in things of this kind. If John Shakspere lived in the supposed Birthplace at his death in 1602,

or the Harts afterwards, this house would naturally have been fixed on as the poet's place of birth, as soon as one was wanted for him. If the Museum was not the real Birthplace, then the dung-heap house probably was. But the way to make all things pleasant is to support the tradition, as Johp suggests, to assume that, from his first arrival in Stratford, John Shakspere lived in the supposed Birthplace—that that is the dung-heap-house of 1552, that the Museum, bought in 1556, was held with it, or annexed to it, and that either in 1575, or "at some unascertained period before 1590" (Johp i., 384) John Shakspere bought the freehold of the house he had so long tenanted, the supposed Birthplace.

These, however, are large assumptions to make. The greater probability is, that as John Shakspere was not a member of the Corporation in 1555 (*Johp* ii., 215), he was not an influential person, and so

lived in a poor house, the dung-heap one, but that after he bought the Museum in 1556, he lived in it, and became of more importance, was put on juries in 1557, 1558, 1560, was elected bailiff in 1568-9, chief alderman in 1571, &c. This better house of 1556 being the Museum, it is more probable that Shakspere was born there than in the supposed Birthplace.

On the chance that Mr. Savage or some other Stratford man may have come across fresh evidence on the subject, I write this letter. But on the old evidence I submit that the poet is much more likely to have been born in the house which his father bought eight years before his birth, the Museum, than in the house he bought eleven years after that birth, the so-called Birthplace. As to Johp's talk about the Birthplace tradition being from "time immemorial," that is gammon, unless it means 1707.

F. J. FURNIVALL.

From the Library of J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, Esq., F.R.S., F.S.A., &c., which was bequeathed to his Nephew and Executor, Ernest E. Baker, F.S.A., January, 1889.

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